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Review of Monic Robillard, *Le Désir de la vierge: Hérodiade chez Mallarmé*

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Le Désir de la vierge: Hérodiade chez Mallarmé. By **Monic Robillard**. Geneva: Droz, 1993. Pp. 221. With this insightful though sometimes difficult book Monic Robillard has gone well beyond his earlier work on Stéphane Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* to offer a reading of the 30-year project where psycho-analytic paradigms and close reading create a lively and suggestive network that moves to the center of Mallarmé's poetics. In "Le Fantôme Lecteur chez Stéphane Mallarmé" (1987), Robillard studied ways in which the generic status of *Hérodiade* and *Igitur* incited particular readings. Closer to the present study, "De l'œuvre à l'œuvre: *Les Noces d'Hérodiade*" (1989) considered the entire *Hérodiade* project where Mallarmé is both the author and, in 1898, the reader of an unfinished work inviting constant rearrangement of the texts that treat simultaneous events. The central reading saw the inscription of the Nurse's maternity and *Hérodiade*'s "fecund virginity" leading to a symbolic feminine. In *Le Désir de la vierge* Robillard returns to the texts of 1864-66 and 1898 to

account poetically for the hiatus of three decades and to understand what the abandonment and subsequent return to the work meant to Mallarmé.

For Robillard, Mallarmé's life and work were haunted by "le mystère du féminin" (9), and *Hérodiade* was the poetic field in which this preoccupation was confronted. The initial confrontation—the crisis years of 1864–66—nearly cost the poet his sanity and health. Yet it gave him a vision of the "Grand Œuvre," the ultimately futile dream of an absolute work of art. The vision remained intimately tied to *Hérodiade*, the heroine and the great work virtually interchangeable in their significance, and it would be the return to the abandoned project and its enigmatic character that allowed Mallarmé to see and express the final impossibility of absolute art. And, because a certain strain of psychoanalytic reading refuses *any* distance between art and life, Robillard attributes to this revelation Mallarmé's death by choking from a spasm of the epiglottis: "Mallarmé a, littéralement, sacrifié sa vie à *Hérodiade*" (13).

The work was of such importance to Mallarmé because the presentation of *Hérodiade*'s purity, her sterile and disdainful virginity, was the image that distilled and idealized the losses of the poet's mother and sister; it even incorporated his young wife (all three shared the name of the Virgin) whom Mallarmé did not love, but whom he had seduced and from guilt had to kill symbolically in order to restore her to prematernal immaculateness. Such purity was not so much precoital as it was prepubescent, however, whence the eventual inclusion, in later poems, of male child figures (related to the deceased son Anatole), all latent, virgin and sexually undifferentiated heroes. John's decapitation/castration dramatizes Mallarmé's failure to produce the *grand œuvre*, as the saint's gaze falls short of the stellar glaciers, only to land upon *Hérodiade*'s nudity, though now with dead eyes. According to Robillard, the images of blood that permeate the 1898 manuscript are not those of deflowerment, but of *Hérodiade*'s coming of age as a woman (186). There will be no more child heroes.

Robillard is thoroughly familiar with the critical literature on *Hérodiade* and with all of Mallarmé's writings, and the readings of the fragments are intelligent and well informed. In the more speculative sections of the study, there is inevitably much both to admire and to question. The extended psychoanalytic and poetic readings of John's decapitation are very convincing. On the other hand, to move via Lacan from theories of male castration and multiple orgasm in females to the observation that "Il semble que dans sa vie et dans son œuvre, Mallarmé n'ait cessé d'être interrogé par la question de la jouissance féminine" (179) omits steps establishing how such a question becomes necessary and pertinent.

Le Désir de la vierge is a provocative addition to the growing body of newer criticism in Mallarmé studies reevaluating the work within the texture of the life. This was a relationship that the poet himself did his best to obfuscate,

and he has been aided and abetted by much modern critical theory. Psychoanalytic readings are especially well poised to make the link in ways that do justice to the complexity of the subject, and in this the present study follows Leo Bersani's *Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* (1982). Robillard's important contribution is in insisting on the *Hérodiade* texts as fundamental to this fruitful approach.

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